

## MUTUAL OBLIGATION: WHY RECIPROCITY IS AN INADEQUATE PRINCIPLE FOR UNEMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES

Individualised reciprocity is the moral bedrock of recent Australian unemployment policies including the Howard Government's principle of Mutual Obligation. In this paper I explore the function of reciprocity within unemployment policy and the politics of redistribution. This exploration allows me to extend existing discussions about Mutual Obligation and include a broader analysis of the civic obligations are framed within it. I argue that temporal and conceptual inconsistencies within Mutual Obligation frame unemployed citizens as perpetual recipients with no past and no future. This artificially static representation justifies the enforced obligations found in current unemployed policy. Other citizens are represented as eternal contributors who are already fulfilling their obligations, a conceptualisation that offers little guidance on general civic responsibilities. Consequently, I argue that reciprocity so-conceived is at best only a partial indicator of whether citizens are fulfilling their obligations to the community. I conclude that individualised reciprocity is an unethical basis on which to administer income support policy in Australia.

### Introduction

Introduced as part of the Work for the Dole policy of March 1997, the principle of Mutual Obligation provides the moral justification for the Howard Government's 'workfare'-style unemployment programme. The popular appeal of Mutual Obligation stems from an underlying principle of reciprocity or that 'people should not get something for nothing' (Kinnear 2001). Recent critiques of Mutual Obligation have focused on the way in which it reframes the idea of a liberal social contract (Kinnear 2000; Yeatman 2000). In particular, critics argue that Mutual Obligation represents a distortion of the contractual ideal because it is a relationship between unequals, and because unemployed citizens do not freely choose to contract with the government (Kinnear 2000: 1; Moss 2001: 1-8). In this paper I will focus on the norm of reciprocity that underpins the contractarian framework of Mutual Obligation: the idea that unemployed citizens must *do something for something*. Recent analyses

(Kinnear, 2000; Moss 2001; Yeatman) have tended to emphasise internal inconsistencies that distort the reciprocal agreement, leading to unfairness. I agree that such internal inconsistencies exist. However, I shall also argue that “individualised” reciprocity, which underpins the principle of Mutual Obligation, should not be directly applied to income support programmes at all. My argument echoes Robert Goodin’s assertion that it is possible to value reciprocity but to reject the Howard Government’s particular interpretation of its function as part of Mutual Obligation (in Brennan 2001:1). In order to assess its suitability as a guiding principle for civic behaviour, I claim that there is a crucial distinction to be made between individualised and general reciprocity.

First, I will begin by exploring the definition of reciprocity within the context of distributive justice. As part of this discussion, I shall briefly explore the notion of reciprocity and civic responsibility in relation to liberal social contract theory. I suggest that the tax/welfare system as a whole pre-supposes a generalised norm of reciprocity that can be applied to all citizens. Second, I will analyse the ways in which reciprocity is interpreted within the Australian welfare system. I argue that the way it is applied to unemployment policy offers little guidance in terms of social justice and serves to further differentiate recipients from users of other social welfare services. Third, I will explore inconsistencies in the conceptualisation and administration of Mutual Obligation that distorts temporal aspects of recipients’ lived experience. These distortions disregard the past and present civic contribution of unemployed citizens and, as such, offer little towards an assessment of civic behaviour. Finally, I shall explore the potential effects of the individualised reciprocity, as outlined in Mutual Obligation, on Australian social welfare. I conclude that instead of providing a new legitimising principle for the Australian welfare state

the use of static reciprocity actually undermines support for social provision. These criticisms lead me to conclude that individualised reciprocity is an inappropriate principle on which to base income support programmes.

## **Reciprocity and Distributive Justice**

Reciprocity can be expressed as an over-arching principle of distributive justice that is mediated by the welfare state as a whole, rather than enforced in relation to only one discreet area of public provision. As the Welfare Rights Centre of South Australia (2000: 3) asserts: 'Mutual Obligation is not only about the provision of money—it is also about the provision of services, support systems [and] educational opportunities'. In normative terms, I would argue that state-mediated reciprocity is based on a general expectation that citizens will contribute to the public good. Conversely, there is a general expectation that citizens can obtain various collectively funded means of support, including income support where the need arises. Alison McClelland (2002: 216) expresses this broader notion of reciprocity, in terms of Marshall's theory of citizenship, where social rights are matched with the responsibility to improve one's position wherever possible.

When seen from a broad perspective, if a small minority of benefit recipients renege on their civic obligation this should not result in the withdrawal of state obligation towards benefit recipients generally. Goodin (2001 191-192) agrees, suggesting that if one takes the obligations of a macro-level reciprocal contract between the state and its citizens seriously, then the fact that one party defaults on their obligation should not nullify the obligation from the other side. He asks: 'Do we really think that

one person's defaulting on his obligations under the social contract is sufficient to void the contract for other parties, cancelling all obligations that they have to him?' (Goodin 2001:193).

Based on this interpretation, reciprocity as general principle of distributive justice is unremarkable. This is not the case where it is expressed as a legally enforceable, individualised contract between the unemployed citizen and the state. Expressed in this way, the civic ideal of reciprocity is openly articulated and enforced only in relation to citizens who require income support. Yet while Mutual Obligation conflates civic contribution with work, it has little to say about other categories of citizen, such as home-workers and the wealthy, who do not work. Goodin (2000:13-14) points out, for example, that if the point of Mutual Obligation is to ensure that people support the common wealth through formal labour, then we should also be compelling 'kept' members of households to work. That such citizens are not compelled to work can be attributed to the peculiarities of the liberal social contract and its conceptualisation of independence, to which Mutual Obligation is related.

### **Civic Responsibility and the Liberal Social Contract**

Within the liberal contract tradition, individual independence is conceived in 'aristocratic' terms (Yeatman 2000: 3). Contracting individuals are, in fact, heads of households who serve as a proxy for their 'dependents'. Indeed, traditional liberal contractarians assumed that all contractors were 'free, rational property-owning men' (Kinnear 2001:4). Even a modern liberal contract theorist such as John Rawls used the family as the foundational institution for his social contract (1974:74). Thus,

liberal contract theory tends to conceptualise civic rights and responsibilities in terms of households, rather than individuals. From this viewpoint, the principle of Mutual Obligation applies only to those citizens that depend on the state; to be dependent on the family is a morally legitimate position. Yet, seen from the perspective of modern family life, in which a growing majority of women participate in the formal labour market, this configuration of independence and dependency and the pattern of obligation it confers is no longer truly representative.

Defining the social obligation of citizens is particularly problematic for social contract theorists as it relates to the women's dependent status within the private sphere. For instance, a conceptual configuration that categorises women as 'dependents' within the family does not appear to value domestic labour, caring work and child rearing as legitimate forms of civic participation. Yet, as long as women are located within a wage-earning household, the moral injunction to seek formal labour is neutralised. However, without a husband to assume the role of male breadwinner within the public sphere, single mothers still perform the same domestic, caring roles but are no longer free from the civic obligation to work. In accepting this vexed conceptualisation of dependency and independence within the family, the principle of Mutual Obligation sends conflicting messages about the centrality of formal labour to the government's concept of civic participation. A further commonly debated weakness of social contract theory revolves around the notions of equality and consent.

Critics of the Howard Government's use of the social contract argue that the inequality of contractors distorts the norm of reciprocity and is, therefore, unfair (Kinnear 2001:6; Moss 2001: 3-4; Goodin 2001: 191). In traditional liberal social

contract theory, citizens exchange their 'natural' freedom for protection from the state, along with other social goods; citizens can withdraw their consent if they consider the contract unfair (Locke 1988: 330-333). In practice, social contract theory has traditionally provided little guidance on how this could be achieved within the confines of the modern nation state. Furthermore, because unemployed citizens cannot be said to freely choose to contract with the Government, it could be argued that Mutual Obligation is not true reciprocity (Kinnear 2001:6; Moss 2001: 3-4; Goodin 2001: 191). These inconsistencies also exist in the application of reciprocity, as part of Mutual Obligation, to the conception of civic obligation within the Australian welfare system.

### **Reciprocity, Civic Obligation and the Australian Welfare State**

Mutual Obligation does offer a specific account of what types of activity unemployed citizens must undertake to fulfil their obligation to the community. Yet, it bases these requirements on a vague reciprocal injunction that 'the Australian community supports you in many ways, for example by paying income support, offering Centrelink self-help facilities and referral services' (Centrelink 2003: Online). Mutual Obligation, therefore, fails to offer an overarching vision of civic rights and responsibilities beyond the invocation of the principle of 'something for something'. The Government claims that this reciprocal invocation is so fair as to be 'common sense', however, the lack of detail on one side of the equation could lead to its being used to authorise unjust social arrangements. As Richard Arneson (1997: 340) points out, 'Reciprocity is in a sense a formal notion. It does not determine what the principles of justice are, to which aid-givers and aid-recipients alike should be loyal'.

Barry Hindess (cited in Yeatman 2001:5) agrees with this criticism, arguing that the idea of moral obligation embedded in the principle of reciprocity is non-specific and does little to clarify the precise nature and distribution of specific obligations amongst citizens in unequal societies, such as Australia.

The inadequacy of individualised reciprocity as a clear guide to agreed-upon civic rights and obligations is exemplified in the differences between the Keating Labor Government's Job Compact and the Howard Government's principle of Mutual Obligation. The reciprocal agreement within the Job Compact was that the Keating Government would provide all citizens who had been unemployed for longer than 18 months with intensive assistance leading to a job placement. This undertaking was based on the Government's self-imposed obligation to 'help unemployed Australians get their fair share of jobs in the [economic] recovery' (Keating 1994: 8). In return, unemployed citizens were expected to accept the job placement or risk losing part of their benefit (Keating 1994:12). Despite a comparatively clear articulation of government obligation, criticisms of the Keating Government foreshadowed contradictions in the reciprocal model of unemployment policy that would become more pronounced under the Howard Government. The Keating Government was accused of looking only at the civic obligations of unemployed citizens rather than that of all citizens: 'The issue of increasing rather than decreasing taxation levels to support the social wage was assiduously avoided' (Bryson 1996: 35). In addition, the Keating Government appeared to accept the neo-liberal argument that economic growth, rather than the state, would provide the much-needed extra jobs (Stilwell 1994: 115).

This transferral of state obligation to the private sector, along with the lopsided approach to civic obligations would worsen under the subsequent Howard Government. In the Howard Government version, the government's side of the reciprocal arrangement is reduced to providing income support and job-search assistance. Today, the Howard Government frames its obligation to unemployed citizens as contributing to their 'economic and social participation' (FACS 2003: Online). To achieve this, the Government claims to follow two broad trajectories: firstly, of 'fostering a culture of self-reliance' and; secondly, by providing income support for those seeking work, undertaking training, engaging in community work or caring for children (FACS 2003: Online). The privatisation of government employment services has contributed further to the disassociation of the state from the obligation to provide employment. In line with its corporate ethos, the privatised Job Network offers a service guarantee rather than a civic entitlement:

You will receive on-going personalised employment services from your preferred Job Network member. These services will be culturally sensitive to your circumstances and background as well as matched to your needs and to the job opportunities available (Australian Employment Services 2003: Online)

In return for this significantly circumscribed support, unemployed citizens are now expected to complete a greater range of activities, largely to show that they are 'actively' looking for work and not free-riding at taxpayer expense. This arrangement includes working for their benefit if they are still unemployed after 6-8 months, depending on their age (Centrelink 2003: Online). Although there are similarities between the Job Compact and Mutual Obligation, significant differences between them show that adherence to reciprocity alone offers no assurance of general standards of fairness.



Overall, while obligations are narrowly prescribed for unemployed citizens, the government side of the equation is voluntary in scope. As the Reference Group on Welfare Reform observes (2000:35), although there are legislative requirements placed on government to provide many different entitlements, the level at which these are provided are largely determined by public expectation.<sup>1</sup> I would also argue that the extent of obligation towards unemployed citizens is determined by the preferences of government, particularly in relation to its perceived role within the labour market. For instance, the Howard Government asserts that, 'Real jobs can only be created by the Government providing a business environment that secures our economic future' (CLAC 1997:1). This echoes the neo-liberal prescription that governments provide the right conditions for the private sector in order to maximise job creation but should otherwise resist interfering directly in the labour market. Yet, even if government agency is limited to providing the right climate for job growth, a continuing jobs shortfall is arguably an indication that it has failed to meet its obligation to unemployed citizens. However, the point is that if governments can determine the scope of their obligation towards unemployed citizens, then reciprocity provides no guarantee of fairness.

Instead, the application of Mutual Obligation to income support programmes tends to further differentiate unemployed citizens from recipients of unconditional social welfare. For unconditional services such as education and hospital care, reciprocity is conceived in the generalised sense of the word. Citizens contribute to the state via taxation over the course of their lifecycle on the understanding that they may access these services for themselves or their children when there is a need. Unlike income

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<sup>1</sup> The assertion that public expectation may determine the level of entitlement also highlights the question of what role governments play in shaping public expectation.

support, therefore, there is no requirement to reciprocate immediately. Veteran and old age pensions also require no immediate reciprocation on the part of recipients. Here too, reciprocity is conceptualised in general terms, based as it is on the assumption that recipients have contributed via taxation throughout their lifespan up to their time of retirement. Therefore, by applying the principle of Mutual Obligation to income support programmes, policy makers treat unemployed citizens as if the generalised reciprocity of the social contract does not, or will not, apply to them. At the same time, it conceptualises working Australians as receiving nothing in return for their civic contribution.

### **Mutual Obligation, Reciprocity and Time**

The distortion of generalised reciprocity in Mutual Obligation stems from its tendency to conceptualise citizens as perpetual contributors to *or* recipients of public largesse. In other words, individualised reciprocity is applied as if recipients have never fulfilled their civic obligation through work and taxes, and that they never will. This distortion is based on a much broader dualistic pattern of thinking about work and non-work exclusively; it contrasts active, independent workers with apparently passive, dependent welfare recipients.<sup>2</sup> This dichotomy was emphatically expressed by the then Minister for Family and Community Services (FACS), Senator Jocelyn Newman (1999: 4):

Where there are jobs available, even though they fall short of the initial expectations of the jobseeker, it is neither fair nor moral to expect the hard working men and women of this country to underwrite what can only be described as a destructive and self-indulgent welfare mentality.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed exploration of this dichotomy, see the author (2002) *The Rise of Liberal Independence and the Decline of the Welfare State*, Doctoral Thesis, QUT.

Here Senator Newman evokes a dichotomy where the lazy, dependent 'dole bludger' is unfavourably contrasted with the independent, hard working 'battler'. These policy subjects are conceptually frozen in their dualistic roles as perpetual contributor and perpetual recipient, with no past and no future.

One contestable assumption that underpins this normative stricture is that long-term recipients of income support are liable to become demoralised and, therefore, will require compulsion. The 'welfare dependency' thesis serves as a significant justification for the Government's belief that for many unemployed citizens need to be reminded of the principle of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> The demoralisation that is assumed to occur as a result of receiving government benefits is framed as a burden on hard-working Australians, regardless of whether those citizens have themselves ever required government assistance.

The dichotomy of contributor or recipient also creates inconsistencies in relation to other categories of income support where some categories of recipient, such as single parents, are categorised as eternal recipients while others, such as elderly pensioners, are not. Despite the fact that Mutual Obligation only applies to some categories (young, long-term unemployed) of unemployed citizens, to be classified as unemployed is to become a recipient with no past and no future. Past contributions

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<sup>3</sup> For a refutation of 'welfare dependency', see authors work in *The Rise of Liberal Independence and the Decline of the Welfare State*, PhD Thesis, QUT; Henman P., Perry, J. (2002) 'Welfare Dependency? A Critical Analysis of Changes in Welfare Recipient Numbers', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 37 (3), 315-335; Marston G. (2002) 'Poor Research, More Poor Bashing', *Just Policy*, 25, March, 58-59.

to society are disregarded, as are potential contributions in the future. Yet, as Kinnear points out:

Not only have income support recipients paid income taxes in the past and are likely to do so in the future, they are also current tax-payers due to the various forms of indirect taxation and the GST, as well as through the direct taxation of some benefits'.

The irony of government policies that cast unemployed citizens as non-contributing recipients is that, because of combined tax and benefit withdrawal rates, they and low-income earners return a greater percentage of their income than do higher income earners (ACOSS 2003:26).

The tendency to define the contribution to society of unemployed citizens only in terms of their present behaviour has been exacerbated in practice by poor information systems dialogue between Centrelink and the recently privatised Job Network. For instance:

First round Job Network contracts lacked any *obligation* for providers to mention client's record of *other* dealings with the agency when recommending breaches [such as honouring prior referrals to interviews, taking up offers of jobs, or otherwise in cooperating in attempts by the provider to locate suitable work]' (Carney & Ramia 2002:286).

In other words, at the time of breaching, no account was taken even of the immediate past of the unemployed citizen concerned. Second round contracts for Job Network providers now stipulate that 'significant events' must be entered onto a screen that can be accessed by Centrelink employees. However, there is some doubt whether providers will adhere to this, 'since they see no commercial value in knowing a person's history' (Carney & Ramia 2002: 287). In this example, contracting out employment services to the market has entrenched the model of what Alvin Gouldner (1975: 271) refers to as the 'contingent self', whose instrumental value is of more

importance than their personal history. Instead, the moral deservingness of unemployed citizens is determined within the narrow parameters of their last engagement with the Job Network rather than over the length of their life span. The tendency of individualised, reciprocal policy to overlook the lived experience of unemployed citizens includes an unwillingness to acknowledge their relative vulnerability. Yet even in terms of the conservative aim of helping citizens to help themselves there should be some recognition of need.

A well-known conservative homily asserts that the ultimate aim of income support systems should be to provide 'a hand up' rather than a 'hand-out'. From this perspective, one core aim of income support programmes must be to improve the life chances of recipients through financial support and assistance in obtaining an adequately paid job. In terms of a reciprocal agreement of 'something for something' the fulfilment of the government side of the obligation should elevate recipients to a better position. If we take this government obligation seriously, then it is difficult to justify the current regime of individualised reciprocity. As Richard Arneson argues, if the point of welfare transfers is to help unemployed citizens who are in a comparatively poor position, then forcing them to reciprocate at that precise point would defeat the point of the transfer (1997:33). Goodin agrees, pointing out that a broader interpretation of reciprocity may mean that those who receive income support may reciprocate at a later time by contributing to programmes that support other citizens (in Brennan 2001: 1). The relatively disadvantaged situation of recipients is a particularly important consideration where income support programmes are means tested so only those who have used their savings and exhausted other options qualify. Indeed, if we think about reciprocity as an over-

arching principle of re-distribution then income support recipients are forced to reciprocate twice for their entitlement.

If individualised, enforceable reciprocity causes unemployed citizens to be treated as eternal recipients the minute they sign on as a Centrelink beneficiary it also conceptualises fully employed citizens as eternal contributors to society; this despite any past or future receipt of government support. The simple symmetry of this conceptual equation does not tell us very much about the reality of general civic obligations. It appears to be based on the premise that formal labour represents an adequate contribution to the community. Yet, to assume that formal employment always leads to positive outcomes for the community is debatable. Conflating the fulfilment of civic obligation with work is also particularly problematic where tax evasion and tax minimisation are commonly practiced since, for many citizens, taxation represents their primary contribution to the common good.

Equally, the dichotomy of eternal recipient and eternal contributor does little to help those in full employment. Treating employed citizens as eternally capable allows governments and policy-makers to overlook the barriers they face in contributing to their own well-being, and that of society. For instance, a recent ACTU study into increased working hours in Australia has shown that the polarisation of the labour force into unemployed or underemployed and overworked citizens has a negative effect on the civic participation of fully employed Australian citizens (Pocock et al:

2001).<sup>4</sup> Further polarisation of work-poor, economically disadvantaged citizens and work-rich, time-poor households may also have serious ramifications for the continued legitimacy of state re-distribution.

### **Individualised Reciprocity and the Legitimacy of Social Welfare**

I would argue that individualisation of reciprocity, as articulated in the Howard Government's principle of Mutual Obligation ultimately serves to undermine the legitimacy of social provision. This is because by openly re-articulating the principle of reciprocity, the Howard Government is signalling to the wider public that some income support recipients are not fulfilling their civic obligations. Invoking the principle of reciprocity in this way reinforces the public perception that those not in receipt of income support are contributors in a one-way agreement from which they do not benefit. This may also have implications for the funding of state services. For instance, Natalie Taylor argues that the way self-identity is shaped will affect levels of taxpayer compliance (2001: 6). Therefore, if policy rhetoric encourages the wider public to frame themselves as eternal contributors to a system that benefits others then the risk is that they will seek to minimise their civic obligation to pay taxes.<sup>5</sup>

The use of individualised reciprocity has, I would argue, particularly serious ramifications for the Australian welfare model. This is because it deepens divisions in what can already be described as a two-tier welfare system. The first tier consists

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<sup>4</sup> For a lengthier discussion, author's work, under review, 'Mark Latham's Third Way: Income Support, Civic Renewal and Collectivism'.

of more universal areas of social provision such as education and health, as well as tax-based welfare, while the second consists of residual, targeted income support programmes. Second tier services are popularly thought of as 'generic' welfare and are highly politicised whereas first tier services are relatively uncontested (Jamrozik, 2001; Baume 1995).<sup>6</sup> Because of this division, citizens are unlikely to think of themselves as benefiting from the welfare system unless they are recipients of income support programmes. The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and the government subsidy on private health insurance are examples where citizens may not perceive that they are recipients of state welfare.

In her work on the Swedish welfare state, civic capacity and trust, Bo Rothstein (2001: 16) has suggested that citizens may be more trusting of government where the emphasis is on the universal delivery of social welfare because this reinforces the perception that all benefit from collectively funded services.<sup>7</sup> She argues:

The universal character of the welfare state may have two important implications for social trust. One is that people receiving support from the government cannot be portrayed as "the others". Second, compared to means-tested programs, universal ones are far less likely to create suspicion that people are cheating the system (Rothstein 2001:16).<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, it could be argued that policies such as Mutual Obligation further increase the moral and public visibility of policy targets relative to the wider

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<sup>5</sup> The willingness of some taxpayers to minimise their contribution is already depriving the state of significant funds. See, ACOSS (1998) 'ACOSS Unveils its \$8 Billion "Hit List" of Tax Shelters' *Impact*, February, 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> These areas have become more politicised under the Howard Government because of its funding of private sector solutions for both health and education, which, some argue, has driven a wedge between the current consumers of private health and education services and those still using the public system. In a sense, this can be seen as an attempt to extend the two-tier system across all service sectors.

<sup>7</sup> In the Swedish case, this is a combination of insurance-style benefits with the universal provision of welfare services such as health and education. Having twice rejected social insurance models, other policy models that do not single out unemployed citizens as a discreet category could be pursued.



population. Residual programmes tend to foster the perception that those in receipt of them are the primary beneficiaries of economic redistribution (Eardley & Matheson 2000: 198; Baume 1995; Jamrozik 2001). The use of individualised reciprocity further narrows the focus of government and media discourse to exclude all apparently deserving recipients of cash transfers, such as older unemployed citizens and aged pensioners. This has the tendency to represent a narrower, apparently less deserving section of the community as the main beneficiaries of the social welfare system. In doing so, policies such as Mutual Obligation de-legitimise collective provision, since programmes are seen as benefiting only citizens whose moral standing is suspect.

Overall, individualised reciprocity is an inappropriate norm for one segment of centrally organised state redistribution. The redistribution system as a whole expresses the principle of reciprocity as an asymmetric relation mediated by the state, which occurs over time. Accordingly, Mutual Obligation can be interpreted as a significant component in the process of individualising social welfare; a process that works against a collective sense of obligation to the state, and to the end-users of state services. This is because policies that are based on individualised reciprocity leave the rest of society out of the equation. This omission is not surprising, since to include all citizens in a discussion of civic rights and responsibilities would require raising issues that politicians have been reluctant to address.

Thus, showcasing the principle of reciprocity might be interpreted as a way of foreclosing on arguments about government responsibility. This is because the

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<sup>8</sup> See also Goodin R. & LeGrand J. (1987) *Not Only the Poor: The Middle Classes and the Welfare State*, London, Allen & Unwin.

symmetry evoked by 'something for something' can give the impression that governments are adequately fulfilling their obligation towards economically vulnerable citizens. Thus, contractarian social policies such as these may allow governments to appear more active on behalf of their citizens than they actually are. The need for governments to show agency in ways that amount to managing the behaviour of disadvantaged citizens are particularly appealing where they have accepted the economic liberal principle to avoid interfering in the market. What is needed is a broader debate about collective provision, as well as what rights and responsibilities citizens expect of their government, and each other. When this occurs, there will be no perceived need to openly evoke the ideal of 'something for something'.

## **Conclusion**

Individualised reciprocity distorts the original purpose of a collectively funded social welfare system. The normative injunction that unemployed citizens owe 'something' to the wider community oversimplifies the relationship between formal employment, taxation and obligation on the one hand, and the funding of collective services on the other. Unemployment benefits are only one part of an entire re-distributive system of taxes, benefits and services. This system is based on a temporally sensitive, asymmetric notion of reciprocity, where there is a general expectation that all citizens will contribute, where possible, and draw on services, where needed, over the course of their lifetimes. This generalised version of reciprocity acknowledges the fact that all citizens will shift between contributor and recipient both over the course of their lifespan, and in relation to each other.

Invoking the principle of reciprocity in relation to one welfare programme does not help Australian citizens understand their rights and obligations in terms of the common good. This is because reciprocity, as it is represented by the Howard Government's principle of Mutual Obligation, is based on the assumption that those citizens currently in paid employment are already contributing to the common good, which forecloses on any meaningful debate about the definition of civic contribution. Even where taxes are considered as the primary form of civic obligation, Mutual Obligation, as it is applied, offers no firm civic expectation concerning acceptable levels of individual compliance or tax minimisation. Neither does Mutual Obligation encourage citizens to consider what forms of formal labour are good for society. It simply assumed that all formal work is a social good, regardless of the consequences. The Howard Government's use of reciprocal obligation also frames employed citizens as inherently capable; a conceptualisation that overlooks difficulties they face, such as long working hours, which may effect their own well-being and that of the community.

Using an individualised conception of reciprocity to focus public attention on the apparent failure of one group of recipients to meet their civic obligation will arguably undermine the basis for collective provision. In theory, Mutual Obligation is based on the assumption that small number of unemployed citizens are failing to fulfil their civic obligation by looking for work. In practice, however, all beneficiaries of unemployment benefits are affected by reforms that take a 'lowest common denominator' approach to policy design. The potential for policies such as Mutual Obligation to stigmatise entire categories of welfare recipients should also be placed within the broader context of Australia's two-tier welfare system, which already

encourages those not in receipt of income support to conceive of welfare as something used by 'others'.

Finally, policies that focus on the obligations of one small group of citizens deflect much needed attention from more substantive issues of social and re-distributive justice. Such issues include the role of government in the labour market, the definition of useful and dignified work, acceptable standards of welfare, and the manner and extent in which the programmes required to ensure such standards are to be funded.